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Topoanalysis as Narrative Technique in John Cheever's Architecture of Short Fiction

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Abstract

The backlash of recent biographies of the American "Chekhov of Suburbs" as an ill-tempered alcoholic bisexual with sharp edges of paranoia might serve to justify Cheever's clumsy, fragmented narratives of grumpy middle class American male commuters who are about to drown in their matrimonial abyss. The present paper's approach is, however, to avoid psychobiography in favor of stylistic defense. Not quite as psychologically neurotic a writer as what the mainstream biographers have claimed, Cheever mastered the architectural design of fiction. An examination of a number of these short stories (excluding his longer novels in which fragmentation is an undeniable weakness) lays bare a kind of spatial consciousness: the Bachelardian notion of topoanalysis as the dominant technique. Whereas the public and private boundaries are naturally trespassed in many stories, such as *Another Story* and *The Enormous Radio*, in some others the protagonists embark on an intentional interference in space – from erasing a whole town in *Geometry of Love* to living another man's life in *Seaside Houses*. Topoanalysis seems to be Cheever's favorite narrative technique to reach phenomenological borders of life, oftentimes in unhomely circumstances where one's totality is menaced by internal and external forces.

Key words: Topoanalysis; John Cheever; Guston Bachelard; Uncanny home; Intimate spaces

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To come to terms with the inner life, it is not enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in narrative terms; one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced.

(Casey, 1997, p.289)

INTRODUCTION

It seems ironic that one of the longest-lasting marriages in the American literary arena turns out to be an unhealthy one, although Mrs. Cheever never reveals to biographer Blake Bailey why she stayed with her husband for forty years while she had known from the very beginning that John was not going to make a proper husband for her. The darker side of Cheever's character as an ill-tempered alcoholic bisexual was revealed only after his death with the publication of Susan Cheever's 1984 *Home before Dark*, then with his posthumously published journals in 1991, and decades later with Bailey's comprehensive *Cheever: A Life* (2009). While the shock was unwelcome by writers like John Updike who complained that biographers have told more than they really need to know about John Cheever (*New Yorker*, 2009), Allen believes that

It is simply an exaggerated version of the disconnect every one of us experiences between the inner and the outer self. In Cheever the contrast was unusually strong between his behavior, which tended to be unspeakable, and the wise, broad, deep intelligence he brought to his fiction and even his journals. (Allen, 2009, p.19)

Referring to the poor reception of Cheever's novels, John Leonard is sorry "that one of the few novelists who knows how to write about the dialectic between men and women (and their children) with a gentle seriousness, a palpable joy, should have made himself a stranger," not knowing how to create a successful whole of a longer story (Collins, 1982, p.1). The estrangement partially

results from Cheever's own troubled mind that according to his psychologists "is so wrapped up in self that there is no room for anything else." Nevertheless, this very property is what marks him as the creator of peerless short fiction. According to Wayne Stengel, "the sense of psychological disorientation that plagued Cheever in the last five years of his life...makes [him] a master of fragmentary, anecdotal short stories and, for some critics, an unsatisfactory shaper of novelistic continuity and *durée*" (Stengel, 1987, p.223).

This paper is, accordingly, a defense of Cheever the Master of suburban narratives by way of assessing both the negative and positive effects of such a troubled psychology on the structure of his literary imagination and verbal architecture. The argument here departs from the dominant trend of psychoanalyzing Cheever's fiction in favor of an often neglected aspect of his idiosyncratic style: A well-engineered installation of fragmentations in a constant process of what Gaston Bachelard calls topoanalysis to provide a dualistic and often self-deconstructive portrait of uncanny home. The home, a place to feel most comfortable and familiar in, has increasingly become a space in capitalist society where the uncanny is experienced (Lewis & Cho, 2006, p.69). The figure of the 'un-homely' home that dominates John Cheever's stories echoes the aftermath of a society in which Capitalist consumerism and feminist crave for equal opportunities have double-alienation effects on the lives of the majority of American men, who find solace neither within home nor in the public space. Cheever deliberately shares the experience with us, thanks to his having lived the typical life of an American suburban to the fullest, through the lens of his restless men's compulsive obsession with objects, places, and fragmented images of domestic life.

1. TOPOANALYSIS AS NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

As a phenomenologist, Bachelard reveals in *The Poetics of Space* how the space around us can go beyond (re)-presenting mere objects of place. It may even play a key role – in dialectics with man's imagination and memory – in defining one's identity. Bachelard's argument commences with the basic premise that the psyche is a place, and the house is an extension of that place. Both the house and consciousness house memories. The role of the researcher is to map these places, to show how they are developed in time or are "becoming" within the moment. Topoanalysis – roughly defined as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (Bachelard, 1964, p.8) – is the means of spatially understanding the self. Such an analysis will often lead to an understanding of place (*topos*) in general because the topography of the self is projected onto our

physical environment. He embarks on his topoanalytic adventure by distinguishing between interior and exterior topography, and then probes into the concept of "dwelling". Bachelard describes the place of the house as one of "protected intimacy" because it shields the self from any form of psychological disturbance. It is a place where one can relax and dream:

The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace...the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places of the past remain in us all the time. (Bachelard, 1964, p.6)

I draw my reading of Cheever on the self-deconstructive function of home in the majority of his short stories, where spatial imagination is but a refuge from the unhomely home or unpleasant state of the self. The exponential alienation of modern man from a central role, an anchor, in his own life to that of a peripheral, almost ignored spectator to a social process that seems self-activating and self-perpetuating, "an alkaline-energized, long-playing world that has little real need of any individuals, requiring merely a mass to fill up seats, consume what is provided for them, carry out the game assignments that are appropriate to their role identity" (Collins, 1982, p.2) becomes a recurrent motif in Cheever's narratives. As Collins has put it, there are three basic types of stories in Cheever's literary heritage: (a) the first type centers on young men or couples living in New York just after the Second World War, the middle-class urban dwellers, whose insecure jobs along with perilous and unsuccessful relationships intensify their inner solitary character, whence they are more vulnerable to hallucination; (b) the second and more popular stories concern the lives of commuters based in the suburbs of New York. The typical Country Husband's outer trappings of classy house, social wife, and self-engrossed children are, in fact, conditions of servitude.

A lonely figure, his real life is the bewildered private one inside his head. Vaguely trying, with rare success, to understand how he got where he is, who he is, what animates the strangers with whom he lives and whom, with a combination of instinctive need and duty, he loves, the Country Husband drinks too much, worries too much, tries too hard. He is ineffectual, pathetic at times, has only limited access to a brilliantly functioning world in which everyone else seems to succeed. (Ibid., p.4)

(c) A third group of stories, all set in foreign countries, is related to the suburban tales, although the central characters are culturally free-floating, and are apt to be that of solitariness reinforced by contrast with an alien culture. In brief, the tales of Italy and other European locales are simply a more obvious indication of the lost figure. According to Collins, Cheever's men are souls "in limbo, rather than hell" (Ibid.).

All these stories share a common ground: Both characters and first-person narrators take spatial

imagination as a subterfuge to distance themselves from their unpleasant situations and yet to obtain a new understanding of their selves and situations.

2. AN ALIEN IN THE KITCHEN: TRESPASSING THE BOUNDARIES OF PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMY

The magnificent ekphrastic opening of Cheever's *Another Story* offers a deliberate description of an urban landscape and an Italian fresco in which public and private lives are intermingled: A woman lying on her bed probably connotes sexual privacy of home whereas nearby some social interactions are undergoing: "The bed is surrounded by court attendants. Higher up the stairs two men are dueling. In the center of the field, a princess is crowning a saint or a hero with flowers. A circle of hunting dogs and other animals, including a lion, is watching the ceremony with reverence" (para.11). The narrator then relates the story of an Italian prince in the United States, of how his values and understanding of life clashes with the American style: "My friend was a prince and Verona his home, but commuting trains, white houses planted with yews, the streets and offices of New York were his landscape, and he wore a green plush hat and a shabby, tightly belted raincoat with a cigarette burn on the sleeve" (Ibid.). Even more skillfully the early theme rhymes with that of the epilogue: A man has lost his sexy, rich, loving and caring wife – "she was everything you could ask for" – who works as an announcer in Newark Airport, simply because he cannot cope with the feeling her voice gives him: the insecure feeling of impersonal presence, of being out of home:

She was speaking to me in that same musical voice she used at the airport, and it made me angry, and so I said, "Honey, don't speak to me like that – don't speak to me in that voice," and then she said, "Will you please come to the table?" just as if she was saying, "Will Mr. Henry Tavistock please report to the American Airlines ticket counter?" So then I said, "Honey, you make me feel as if I were waiting for a plane or something." I mean, your voice is very pretty, but you sound very *impersonal*. (*Another Story*, emphasis mine)

With wives who earn more than their husbands and are apparently more into social codes, *Another Story* could be read as the story of eccentrically average men who can never feel at home. And in their desperate struggle to understand why, they realize that everything about their love, their home or dwelling place has become irritatingly impersonal.

In *The Enormous Radio*, the apparently heavenly privacy of Jim and Irene Westcott is menaced by interfering noises – noises belonging to the exterior public space that now invade Irene's privacy and meanwhile trigger her imagination:

The elevator shaft in her building ran beside the living-room wall, and it was the noise of the elevator that gave her a clue to the character of the static. The rattling of the elevator cables and the opening and closing of the elevator doors were reproduced in her loudspeaker, and, realizing that the radio was sensitive to electrical currents of all sorts, she began to discern through the Mozart the ringing of telephone bells, the dialing of phones, and the lamentation of a vacuum cleaner. (*The Enormous Radio*, para.3)

The menace turns out to be a mental condition, rather than a supernatural force, which comes to its height in *The Swimmer* where the main character symbolically swims through all pools of the neighborhood, freely moving into and out of the privacy of typical American families to reach his own house, a house that does not belong to him anymore and, with shuttered windows and locked door, lacks the privacy of an actual home:

He had swum too long, he had been immersed too long, and his nose and his throat were sore from the water. What he needed then was a drink, some company, and some clean, dry clothes, and while he could have cut directly across the road to his home he went on to the Gilmartins' pool.... The house was locked, and he thought that the stupid cook or the stupid maid must have locked the place up until he remembered that it had been some time since they had employed a maid or a cook. He shouted, pounded on the door, tried to force it with his shoulder, and then, looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty. (*The Swimmer*, last para.)

The mental imbalance of characters is highlighted by Cheever's illusive technique of narration. The final realization of the loss of home comes uncomely as a sudden shock to the reader. Apparently Cheever's topophilia and lengthy description of dwelling places is a narrative technique towards his late effect. Whenever a dilemma befalls their matrimonial life, wherever a threat of separation is felt or in many cases when good-hearted male characters struggle to elevate themselves from a degrading situation – addiction to cigarettes or alcohol *par example* – they figure out everything in spatial and mathematical illustrations, although in many cases the ending is rather helpless and tragic.

Johnny Hake in *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill* has lost his job and money. Perforce he starts robbing the houses of wealthy neighbors at night, and when his two sons give him a ladder as birthday present it would surprisingly signify an acknowledgment of his filthy deeds. But this is just the beginning of a pathetic mental journey to other people's private lives and relations as well as his own, fancying their likewise pathetic situation. The climax of this self-conscious sensitivity to places and sounds occurs in his cubicle as he (ear)-witnesses the illegal business of the man next-door, as the occasion stimulates him to travel back in time and memory and remember his own parents' relationship and what brought them to a divorce. The experience is immediately juxtaposed with other instances of fraud and misdeed:

The sky was dark when I came out on the street. Lights were burning everywhere. I looked into the faces of the people that I passed for some encouraging signs of *honesty* in such a crooked world, and on Third Avenue I saw a young man with a tin cup, holding his eyes shut to impersonate blindness. That seal of blindness, the striking innocence of the upper face, was betrayed by the frown and the crow's-feet of a man who could see his drinks on the bar. (*The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*)

A man with the heavy burden of conscience on his shoulders sees and feels his environment differently. The short narratives of *The Metamorphosis* each begin with a unique experience and moral dilemma that cause the subject to see things differently and move towards destruction. A humble client witnessing his bosses having sex in the main office should be beaten by his own dogs for this moral flaw; a man struggling to quit smoking ends up feeling all the smells and sights around him transfigured as moving cigarettes, as in the case of Mr. Bradish:

He went down in the elevator with a stranger whose brown suit looked and smelled like a Havana Upmann, but Bradish kept his eyes on the floor of the carriage and contented himself with breathing in the stranger's fragrance. The elevator man smelled of a light, cheap blend that had been popular in the fifties. The doorman, he noticed, looked and smelled like a briar pipe with a Burley mixture. And on Fifty-seventh Street he saw a woman whose hair was the color of his favorite blend and who seemed to trail after her its striking corrupt perfume. (*Metamorphosis*, IV, last para.)

Suffering from compulsive obsessions with smells and objects in their environments, Cheever's characters are in dialectics with the surrounding space. As they catch sight of the objects that accord with their mental scratches, the space seems to respond to their concerns in the form of chance and coincidence. As a result of this, they often lack a sense of security and peace even in their houses and in their relation with other family members. For the just-divorcé narrator of "*Cure*," the house is but an empty dwelling place that could fall apart at any moment with the appearance of a Peeping Tom. In "*The Chimera*," the man spends hours contemplating and speaking to his imaginary belle Olga, whenever he finds life unbearable with his wife. The bedroom rings no bell of an intimate space; it is where he has to serve his wife's breakfast in bed. Ironically the porch and the solitude of the bathroom are intimate spaces that the narrator can take refuge and think.

3. THE TOWER, THE TRAIN AND THE SCARLET MOVING VAN: NARRATIVES OF MELANCHOLIC COMMUTERS AND OUTCASTS

Assessing the vertical value of a house in terms of their phenomenological function, – as Žižek does in the Lacanian analysis of houses in Hitchcock movies –

Bachelard finds the third floors, the roof and the attic the place of consciousness, the light world of day and knowledge, while the basement is often regarded as the place of the unconscious, the unknown and fears. In Freudian terms, while the basement is identified with id, the first and second floors are the dwelling place of ego, and the higher places represent superego or conscience. Cheever's male characters are the ones that often dwell in the first floor, on the porches or on the roofs. Il Poeta of *The Golden Age* is in love with contemplating over the sensual landscapes from the battlements and so do most other men in the stories. Like Cheever himself, they are all so wrapped up in self that there is no room for the unconscious and in the meantime are torn to pieces under the burden of moral dilemmas or sense of guilt.

By the term *uncanny* – exemplified with an 'unheimlich' or haunted house (p.13), Freud meant an instance where something can be familiar, yet incongruous and dissonant when experienced. This cognitive dissonance often leads to an outright rejection of the object, as one would rather reject than rationalize (Lewis & Cho, 2006, p.69). Cheever's characters undergo the same kind of experience – feeling haunted or unhomely – towards home as they often make no intimate connection to their dwelling places, accordingly carry a feeling of homelessness from home to work and back. This is a recurrent scene in the narratives of commuters.

In *The Geometry of Love*, perhaps the paragon of Cheever's topographic stories, Malory the freelance engineer attempts to figure his problematic relationship with his wife via Euclidian geometry and in a surreal vision he finds a solution for removing all unpleasant things in his life:

Mathilda was in the small dining room, setting the table, when he returned. Her opening gun was meant to be disabling. "Pinkerton fink," she said. "Gumshoe." While he heard her words, he heard them without anger, anxiety, or frustration. They seemed to fall short of where he stood. (*The Geometry of Love*)

Gradually he manages to erase an entire town– the space he saw every day through the train window – from his mental world, yet this is a double-erasure as the more he erases unpleasant aspects of his life, the closer he gets to self-erasure and final destruction. Soon after this, he breaks down and tragically dies in a hospital.

In *The Scarlet Moving Van*, man's homelessness is a sacrament, and Gee-Gee the fair alcoholic vagabond is given a prophetic power. With his fine qualities and charms as a sober man he finds his way to the houses of normal healthy couples but as soon as he gets drunk, the Dionysian Demon reappears and starts insulting and scorning other people's boring ways of life, by getting nude in front of the crowd, singing and profanity. The red moving van's homelessness is contagious and whoever believes in Gee-Gee is doomed to homelessness. Ironically in Gee-Gee's religion one is much happier in a

remote dwelling place with no intimate bondages than in boringly secure and well-protected houses.

Diasporic outcasts make another group of Cheever's characters who are inflicted by *topophilia/topophobia*. Cheever's *A Woman Without a Country* relates the unlucky betrayal of a good wife, disclosure of the deed following the death of the heartbroken husband and Anne's incognito sail to Genoa to avoid social criticism. In Italy,

Her villa was charming – nightingales sang in the oak trees, fountains played in the garden, and she stood on the highest terrace, her hair dyed the shade of bronze that was fashionable in Rome that year, calling down to her guests, "Bentornati. Quanto piacere!" but the image was never quite right. It seemed like a reproduction, with the slight imperfections that you find in an enlargement – the loss of quality. The sense was that she was not so much here in Italy as that she was no longer there in America. (*A Woman Without a Country*, para.6)

In order to portray the defective state of a social outcast, Cheever once again adopts topography as narrative technique. In *The Seaside Houses*, the journey to the sea and exploration of an unknown house is described as a "ceremonious excitement". The narrator enjoys exploring all the corners of the house that does not belong to him, perhaps as a defense mechanism to escape the intimate space of his own, and imagining the life of the "other" absent man instead of his own:

All my dealings are with agents, and I have never known the people from whom we have rented, but their ability to leave behind them a sense of physical and emotional presences is amazing. Our affairs are certainly not written in air and water, but they do seem to be chronicled in scuffed baseboards, odors, and tastes in furniture and paintings, and the climates we step into in these rented places are as marked as the changes of weather on the beach. Sometimes there is in the long hallway a benignness, a purity and clearness of feeling to which we all respond. Someone was enormously happy here, and we rent their happiness as we rent their beach and their catboat. (*The Seaside Houses*, first para.)

The idea of renting someone else's memories and happiness has a concrete realization in this story; the narrator gradually identifies himself with the alcoholic owner of the house, dreams his dreams, lives his life and finally ruins his matrimonial life as did the former man. Why does he do so? Is it out of mental disturbance, escape from uncanny boredom of a happy family life towards Gee-Gee's prophetic homelessness? Perhaps.

CONCLUSION

Cheever's keen administration of public and private spaces, as reviewed in a selection of his short stories, reveals tight association with the Bachelardian notion of *topoanalysis*. As I have attempted to show in the above examples, topoanalysis is more than random psychological impulses in Cheever's stories; it rather functions as a dominant narrative technique.

Yet, it should be made clear that while Bachelard's phenomenological approach to the poetics of imagination draws on the experiences of intimate, personal spaces by summoning them from memory, Cheever's disturbed characters often consciously avoid remembrance of bedroom memories with their lost wives or family members or any description of familiar home. Instead, they deliberately amuse themselves with an exploration of here and now, a sort of topography of the moment. Like the narrator of *The Seaside Houses*, they prefer to hire someone else's memories, happiness and intimate spaces, or as in *The Geometry of Love*, they find a mental strategy to erase all spatial memories. The mental condition of these characters rather resembles the Freudian experience of uncanny; an escape from private to public spaces becomes a defense mechanism to make them capable of coping with unpleasant situations in life. All in all, it is noteworthy that the majority of Cheeverian male characters are more or less obsessed with space and topoanalysis appears to be Cheever's favorite narrative technique to reach the phenomenological borders of life during unhomely circumstances when one's totality is menaced by internal and external forces.

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